



BOOK REVIEW

Justin O'Connor and Xin Gu (2020) Red Creative. Culture and Modernity in China. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Elena G. Trubina

Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

“Red Creative” is a welcome, spirited and conceptually rich book that traces the adoption and development of creative industries in China. The book offers the reader a dense set of considerations at a moment when creativity discourses are ubiquitous but fewer people are thinking about what they portend. It demonstrates how differently the discourses of neoliberalism, civilization, culture and creative industries are translated and implemented in this country.

It is often thought that the strength of cultural policy analysis rests on the extent to which it accords with key successes and pitfalls of the on-going capitalization on and commodification of culture. Since the massive shift from an industrial Fordist to a post-industrial post-Fordist economy is truly global, it includes the imaginaries and best practices of re-inventing and regenerating localities through cultural activity, including festivals and biennials as the promising remedy. The creative industries are praised for increasing productivity through spillovers and generating jobs. Creativity, more generally, has been widely considered as the major source of producing economic value. Yet when cultural policy analysis comprehends principled moral reasoning, misgivings and ambivalences are abounding. These include our doubts about whether it is permissible to reduce cultural values to financial and organizational KPI, whether the processes of adjusting culture to management are always beneficial and rational, and whether justified and popularized recipes for success are sufficient for increasing knowledge of both the general educated public and academics.

These doubts increase in case of the non-Western countries which are variously prompted to embrace the creative economy discourse. A tension exists between the Western models of cultural and creative industries and the local contexts in which stakeholders operate. Traditionally, cultural policy analysts have relied on their Western expertise as the basic data for cultural policy inquiry. The problem with that strategy is that they often share the same educational

background as well as a similar way of thinking. The more valuable then are the attempts to expand the base of expertise and analysis by combining intellectual efforts of scholars with significantly different background. While one of the book's authors—Justin O'Connor, starting from his work in Manchester, UK, in 1996, has become a key scholar in cultural and creative industries policy development, the other—Xin Gu—focused more closely on small-scale local creative industries development services not only in UK but in China and Indonesia which has made her a specialist in the ways different social, economic and political conditions impact understanding and implementation of creative economy. Both authors are UNESCO experts and thus are closely familiar with actors coming from different countries, from national associations to international institutions, and with diversified links among these actors, covering consultancy and funding, together with both scientific and market interests.

In this book, the authors argue for the usefulness and power of diverse analytical tools—a deep historical account of the links among culture and modernity, participant observations in numerous field sites over an extended period of time, a holistic approach rather than a focus on one particular topic, focus on the ambivalences stemming from the authors' attempt to capture “unknown knows”. They elaborate on this as follows: to see your country of birth anew, via a foreign narrative of an alternative future, of what is useful and what should be jettisoned in order to get there, is to make that unknown known visible; to do this demands you learn to “re-know” your own country, in an internal struggle made familiar by much postcolonial writing. At the same time, for the non-Chinese author, the process involved making the known unknown—or at least strange. For what was this discourse demanding that a country of one billion, with historical roots reaching back into the Axial Age, must now be creative? (p. 7)

Conceiving of this discourse as a case of Western developmentalism (p. 9), the authors develop three main conceptual frameworks, each amplifying a particular facet of “reddening” creativity (“Red Creative”, to remind, is the title of the book): from theory of neoliberalism, the authors spotlight the significance of depoliticization and a restriction of individual expression to narrow Chinese subjects' choices to consumer ones; theories of modernity (classic Western ones and otherwise) provide a means of articulating the agentic force of change, located somewhere between material and affective; finally, the authors turn to conceptualizations of culture to think through its implication in the production of cities: culture, among many things, was used “to cement the ‘spatial fix’ under the imperative to be creative or lose the future” (p. 203). These three strands are synthesized throughout the course of the book in ways that refract the thick knowledge of cultural economies, the national cultural history, soft power concerns, etc. through the intriguing complexities, disjunctures and frictions of today's urban China.

The authors zoom in on Shanghai (they have devoted two chapters to this city) and this writing strategy does let them to develop complex historic narratives that more fully engage the interdependencies of culture and state and economy than just a general analysis. They capture the “deep” history of creative industries in this city, spanning the whole twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first century. The book

traces Shanghai's emergence by the mid-1920s as the great cosmopolitan center of an international intellectual and artistic avant-garde (p. 98) to its remaking as the cultural hub which rapidly rose up the global creative cities index (p. 201) and the largest art market in the world. The 2010 Expo, Xintiandi, a redeveloped area of Lilongs, numerous art galleries and "hip" areas are presented by the authors as the embodiment of "haipai". Shanghai's recognizable "haipai" is the opposite of both Beijing culture and rurality. *Haipai* culture was formed in the context of Shanghai's cosmopolitanism, and then, by the end of the twentieth century, the golden years of the 1920s and 1930s were carefully brought back to life by intellectuals to be later appropriated by the Shanghai government. "Old Shanghai" became an asset in the nostalgic context of the 1990s and the combination of both pre- and post-Communist layers in *haipai* has helped to Shanghai to return into the global orbit. O'Connor and Gu poignantly describe how the city's past, including its pride—*haipai* culture—was selectively employed to find a new place for the city in the global order. Rather than simply shifting the urban economy towards the post-industrial mechanisms (real estate speculation and advanced business services), the authorities retrieved the old Shanghai to make the city look and sound less soulless (the opposite example here is Shenzhen, which is built on the "industrial park" model): "Shanghai's haipai culture was used to reprogram the urban cultural landscape and rebrand its identity as a global cultural city" (p. 265).

Creativity is justifiably conceived in the literature as an individual capacity and thus creative subject comes to the fore. Not only she or he forms unique esthetic or organizational content but this subject also crystallizes collective experience into the singular works that are often meaningful for millions. The authors devote to creative subjects the final chapter where they interestingly portray the links among creativity and conformity, a lack of time and opportunities to properly "gestate" the new products, and impossibility to nourish one's uniqueness and unpredictability in a heavily disciplined milieu. Acknowledging that the Chinese creative subjects definitely need to be studied in more depth, the authors compellingly demonstrate that it is the government that finally attests to their creative talents: "a stronger nationalist sense of beating them at their own game" (p. 279) is always present.

This is a vigorously critical book that in effect challenges many those who are too eager "to force Chinese history into a Western format" (p. 60). It is also strongly concerned with the current state of creative affairs. A peculiar combination of the "post-cultural" and "post-creative" industries, amplified by the aggressive use of "smart cities" ideology and related technologies, the authors demonstrate, leads to directing the opportunities of artificial intelligence towards increased manipulation of the Chinese society, made easy by the wide-spread preoccupation of its citizens with consumption. Combining wide learning with a tenacious and undogmatic focus on the problems of creative industries, O'Connor and Gu have written a book that identifies fresh solutions to many important problems and should become a key reference point for cultural theorists, "creatives", scholars of China, and cultural policy experts.